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ABSTRACT

Female aging, compared to male aging, is associated with a greater decline in status and attractiveness. To investigate whether sex differences in the perception of aging function at both the cognitive and affective levels, 76 college students (38 male, 38 female), with a mean age of 22.8, viewed slides of a male and female adult. Subjects were given a brief sketch of each stimulus person, labelled as either middle-aged or elderly. They then assigned chronological age estimations to each slide, and rated each on bipolar traits according to a 7-point scale. An analysis of the results showed that the college age males' judgments of age, more than those of females, were influenced by age labels. When given extrinsic age categorizations, males tended to override facial cues as a guide to a person's chronological age. However, the greater sensitivity of males to the age dimension did not imply the presence of age stereotyping. Male and female subjects did not differ in their attribution of personality traits to presumed ages. (BL)

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Is Age a More Salient Dimension for Males than for Females?

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Is Age a More Salient Dimension for Males than Females?

It has been recognized for some time that aging does not have an identical impact upon males and females. Indeed, the term "double standard of aging" was coined by Susan Sontag (1975) to refer to refer to the greater decline in status and attractiveness associated with female in comparison to male aging. A similar phenomenon has been described by Simone de Beauvoir (1972). Empirical evidence in support of the foregoing observations has come from various sources. Drevenstedt (1976) found that women were believed to enter middle-aged and elderly adulthood at an earlier age than men. Such beliefs were found to be in correspondence with data from age-judgment research. Thus, in a study by Kogan (1979a), subjects made chronological age estimates of male and female photos that they had categorized as middle-aged or elderly. These age estimates were significantly lower for female than for male stimulus photos, again indicating the earlier perceived onset of the above age stages in females as compared to males.

The research described above has focused on sex-of-target effects in age perception. There has been considerably less concern about sex-of-subject effects and its possible interaction with sex of target. Kogan (1979a) has reported such an interaction in the affective domain; the judged age of preferred male and female photos did not differ for female subjects, but differed substantially in the case of male subjects for whom the estimated ages of preferred female stimulus persons were considerably younger than were the estimated ages of male stimulus persons. These data suggest that the "double standard of aging" represents more a reflection of male than female values. The present investigation pursues this sex difference further and inquires whether it can be

demonstrated at a cognitive as well as affective level. In particular, we wish to determine whether age is a more salient dimension for males than for females in the sense that the former are more sensitized to age differences than are the latter.

We subsequently inquire whether such a sex difference, if found, has any impact upon personal evaluations of stimulus persons. Does greater sensitivity to the age dimension necessarily imply a greater degree of age stereotyping?

Method

A total of 136 undergraduates (52 males and 84 females) at a New York state college served as subjects. Males ranged in age from 19 to 52, with a mean of 22.9; females ranged in age from 18 to 47 with a mean of 22.7. Subjects were drawn from four sections of an introductory psychology course, each section assigned to one of the four conditions of the experiment. Regrettably, the sections varied in size, with the smallest containing 19 subjects. To facilitate the analysis, a random number table was used to discard subjects so as to yield 19 subjects in each of the four conditions, a total of 76 subjects (38 males and 38 females) in all.

All subjects were exposed to two slides--a male and female adult. In two of the sections, the stimulus persons were identified as "middle-aged"; in the other two sections, as "elderly." Within the two sections, one responded to the photos in the male-female order, the other in the female-male order.

The two photos were selected from a pool employed previously in age judgment research (Kogan, 1975, 1979a). The criterion for their selection was based on the mean of the distribution of chronological age estimations. We chose photos whose mean attributed age fell close to a boundary region between the middle-aged and elderly categories (generated by subjects in the Kogan, 1979a, study). Such photos in our opinion could be designated as either "middle-aged" or "elderly" without a loss of credibility.

The "middle-aged" and "elderly" labels were embedded in a brief neutral sketch describing the stimulus persons employed. An example follows:

"This middle-aged individual is married with one child and lives in Hartford, CT, where he has been employed for some time. He collects coins as a hobby. He has a cat and a dog as pets."

Subjects provided chronological age estimations of the male and female stimulus persons, and in addition, rated each along a 7-pt. scale on the 32 bipolar traits taken from the Rosencranz and McNevin (1969) semantic differential.

Results

Chronological age estimation

Consistent with expectations, a main effect for age-of-target was found, F (1, 72) = 16.10, $p < .0001$. A higher mean chronological age was assigned to a photo when labelled as "elderly" as opposed to "middle-aged" (56 vs. 52.3). Since the photos were identical across labelling conditions, the foregoing finding indicates the important influence of an age categorization in estimating how old someone is.

A significant sex-of-target effect was also obtained, $F(1, 71) = 64.52$, $p < .0001$, with the male photos judged to be younger than the female photos (56.4 vs. 52). This outcome is of little theoretical interest, for it merely points to age-relevant stimulus properties specific to the particular photos selected. There was also a significant sex-of-subject effect, F (1, 72) = 5.99, $p < .01$, with males judging photos to be older (55.3 vs. 53.0).

The finding of major import is the significant interaction effect obtained between age-of-target and sex-of-subject, $F(1, 72) = 12.02$, $p < .001$. The table of means shown below demonstrates the interaction.

		Age of photo	
		middle-aged	elderly
Sex of Subject	male	51.9	58.6
	female	52.8	53.3

It can be seen that the age labels had little impact upon female subjects in their estimation of chronological age. In striking contrast, the age labels dramatically influenced male's age judgments. It is thus evident that an extrinsic age categorization can in the case of males override facial cues as a guide to a person's chronological age.

Note finally that no triple interaction was found, indicating that the findings shown in the table generalize across male and female photos.

Personality traits

The semantic-differential ratings were factor analyzed, and the resultant principal components solution was subjected to a varimax rotation. Three interpretable factors were found and respectively named efficacy, receptivity, and modernity. Indicated below are the scales yielding loadings greater than .47 for each of the factors:

Efficacy

Healthy	-	Unhealthy
Busy	-	Idle
Productive	-	Unproductive
Strong	-	Weak
Active	-	Passive
Decisive	-	Indecisive

Receptivity

Generous	-	Selfish
Friendly	-	Unfriendly
Tolerant	-	Intolerant
Trustful	-	Suspicious
Pleasant	-	Unpleasant
Cooperative	-	Uncooperative

Modernity

Liberal	-	Conservative
Progressive	-	Old-fashioned
Exciting	-	Dull

Three factor scores were generated for each subject, and these served as dependent variables in a MANOVA design, with manipulated age-of-target, sex-of-subject, and sex-of-target as independent variables. Significant effects were observed only for sex-of-target, a finding of little theoretical value given that the differences may simply reflect stimulus properties of the specific photos employed.

Conclusions

The present findings clearly point to significant sex-of-subject effects in age perceptions. College-age males, relative to their female peers, were observed to be more responsive to age-relevant information when estimating the age of a person depicted in a photo. It appears that the age categorization provided by the age label can influence how old another person looks when the judge is male. In contrast, females are not so influenced by the age labels. One might argue that females did not notice the age-label information. It appears more likely, however, that the stimulus cues provided by the face are of greater prominence for females than the age-category information arbitrarily provided by the experimenter. We then tentatively conclude that females are less likely than males to categorize adult individuals by age. In other words, we are suggesting that age is a less salient dimension for females than for males in judging other individuals.

There is other evidence supportive of such an inference. For example, in a study by Kogan (1979a), subjects provided chronological age estimations for a set of photos and then were asked to select the two photos that could be considered most similar (by whatever criterion the subjects chose to employ). The two chosen photos were significantly closer in estimated age for male than for female subjects. In still another study (Kogan, 1974), subjects were given a set of photos to group in terms of whatever categories the subjects preferred to employ. Groupings were made on the basis of physical, psychological, demographic, or explicit age criteria. In the present case, the percentage of age-based groupings was higher for males than for females, though the effect was significant only in the case of female photos.

In sum, the outcomes of the present study in conjunction with the earlier work point to a converging pattern of evidence suggestive of a greater sensitivity to age as a characteristic of people on the part of males relative to females. Though this phenomenon appears to be a fairly robust one, its social and psychological antecedents remain obscure. One can go out on an evolutionary limb and speak in terms of the functional value of age sensitivity in males in relation to the procreative potential of female partners and the status of potential male rivals. It is difficult to conceive of an analogous adaptive function for age sensitivity in females based on our evolutionary history. All of this is highly speculative, of course, and incapable of being confirmed or disconfirmed. It would obviously be in our scientific interest to find more proximal determinants of these gender differences.

Given evidence cited earlier suggesting a possible affective bias toward youth in males picture preferences, we were surprised by the absence of any sex-of-S by age-of-target effects in the personality trait ratings. It would seem from our data that the greater sensitivity of males to the age dimension

does not necessarily imply the presence of age stereotyping. There was no indication that males (or females) attributed less efficacy or modernity, for example, in the "elderly" as opposed to the "middle-age" condition. Nor did subjects' age estimations correlate with any of the personality factor scores. The absence of such stereotype effects may have diverse sources. First, the study entailed a between-Ss design, which, according to Kogan (1979b) minimizes age-stereotyping effects. Also of note is the indication that the stimulus persons were judged to be in their 50s, and hence of an age where stereotypes may not yet apply. We can merely conclude at the present time that sensitivity to extrinsic age information in judging others' age does not seem to covary with the differential attribution of personality traits on the basis of the target's assigned or presumed age.

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